





Mountain farming is family farming

Three generations are threshing barley in Pitumarca, Peru (S.-L. Mathez-Stiefel)



Thomas Kohler and Rosalaura Romeo

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Family enjoying a rest during a hard working day in their small *chacra* (field), Bolivia (S.-L. Mathez-Stiefel)

From a global perspective, mountain farming is family farming. Mountain areas, with their dispersed patches of useable land at different altitudes with different climates and with their often highly fragmented landscapes and narrow limits for mechanization, are most efficiently and effectively managed by family farms.

Family farming in mountains is as diverse as the myriad mountain landscapes of the world, but at the same time, there are also commonalities. For example, mountain family farms are usually not the centres of national production in terms of quantity, with the exception of tropical mountain regions. Most of their production is for family consumption, playing a key role in ensuring household food security. In addition, family farms in mountains help shape mountain landscapes, providing ecosystem services that are vital for development far beyond mountain areas. These services include provision of freshwater, disaster risk reduction, preservation of biodiversity including agro-biodiversity, and space for recreation and tourism.

Family farming communities also are custodians of place identity, spiritual and cultural values, and of site-specific knowledge – a precondition for survival in most mountain areas. The motivation of family farmers thus goes beyond profit maximization, to include social, cultural and ecological motives (1). This is particularly important in mountain areas, where time and resources required for reproductive activities – those that do not directly generate income but are indispensable for maintaining the natural production base – are generally higher than in lowland areas. The terraced landscapes found in all major mountain regions of the world are the most spectacular testimony of such reproductive investment. In addition, family farming in mountains largely operates with low external inputs, most often owing to circumstances rather than choice, meaning that mountain farmers often do not have the means, in terms of physical access or finance, to invest in



external inputs such as fertilizer, plant and animal protection chemicals, let alone machinery.

Accessibility is a key issue in mountain farming, especially in developing countries. But this goes far beyond access to farm inputs – it includes access to basic infrastructures such as health services, schools, roads, transport, markets and communication with the outside world. This lack can be attributed to difficult topography and low population densities relative to lowland areas, factors that increase investment and maintenance costs. Moreover, mountain farmers – like mountain people in general – are often a minority in their countries in terms of numbers. They live far away from the centres of economic and political power and decision-making, and are often marginalized in political, social and economic terms. This is particularly true for communities with livelihoods and farming practices that deviate from global and national mainstreams, such as shifting cultivators or pastoralists, which are both prominent and important in mountain regions. Pastoralists, for example, use large tracts of marginal mountain lands through mobility that would remain unproductive otherwise.

One of the results of marginalization is widespread poverty. Around 40% of mountain populations in developing and transition countries – about 300 million people – are food insecure, with half of them suffering from chronic hunger (2). In response, family farming in many mountain areas is increasingly affected by outmigration. Although those who leave can provide remittances, it also means heavier workloads for those remaining – women, children and the elderly. Limited availability of land that often has low productivity, lack of recognized land tenure rights and population pressure are all elements that can contribute to unsustainable use of mountain natural resources.

The International Year of Family Farming (IYFF) 2014 presents an opportunity to focus attention on the merits and challenges of family farming in mountain areas. Supporting sustainable forms of family farming also promotes food security and a balanced diet and good environmental stewardship. This also recognizes and supports values and traditions that are conducive to securing key ecosystem services that are critical for development and that reach far beyond mountain regions. In mountain areas, family farming often remains an occupation of last resort while, under the right conditions, it could become the backbone for sustainable development. This report highlights examples from mountain areas worldwide that have made inroads towards this aim.

What is family farming?

According to FAO's working definition, family farming is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production that is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, including both women's and men's. The family and the farm are linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, social and cultural functions.

Family farming is one of the most predominant forms of agriculture worldwide, in both developing and developed countries. Diversity of national and regional contexts, in terms of agro-ecological conditions, territorial characteristics, infrastructure availability (access to markets, roads, etc.), policy environment and demographic, economic, social and cultural conditions, influence family farming structures and functions, as well as livelihood strategies. [3]

Globally, the sector employs 2.6 billion people or 30% of the world's population, and is especially important in developing countries. While family farming covers a wide spectrum of farm sizes and types, ranging from large mechanized farms to smallholdings of a few hectares or less, it is the small family farms, run by small producers, that are by far the most numerous. Globally, they account for about 99% of all people engaged in farming [4].

www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/en/